



Research report

Meat, beyond the plate. Data-driven hypotheses for understanding consumer willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet [☆]



João Graça ^{a,*}, Abílio Oliveira ^b, Maria Manuela Calheiros ^a

^a Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS-IUL, Lisboa, Portugal

^b Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), ADETTI-IUL, Lisboa, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

A shift towards reduced meat consumption and a more plant-based diet is endorsed to promote sustainability, improve public health, and minimize animal suffering. However, large segments of consumers do not seem willing to make such transition. While it may take a profound societal change to achieve significant progresses on this regard, there have been limited attempts to understand the psychosocial processes that may hinder or facilitate this shift. This study provides an in-depth exploration of how consumer representations of meat, the impact of meat, and rationales for changing or not habits relate with willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet. Multiple Correspondence Analysis was employed to examine participant responses (N = 410) to a set of open-ended questions, free word association tasks and closed questions. Three clusters with two hallmarks each were identified: (1) a pattern of disgust towards meat coupled with moral internalization; (2) a pattern of low affective connection towards meat and willingness to change habits; and (3) a pattern of attachment to meat and unwillingness to change habits. The findings raise two main propositions. The first is that an affective connection towards meat relates to the perception of the impacts of meat and to willingness to change consumption habits. The second proposition is that a set of rationales resembling moral disengagement mechanisms (e.g., pro-meat justifications; self-exonerations) arise when some consumers contemplate the consequences of meat production and consumption, and the possibility of changing habits.

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Introduction

During the last century there was a massive and unprecedented increase in the frequency and amount of consumption of animal-based products, materializing in an ongoing global approach to the standards and lifestyles of industrialized western countries (Delgado, Rosegrant, Steinfeld, Ehui, & Courbois, 1999). This transition characterizes a rise in the consumption of livestock products and a shift away from grains and vegetables as societies become more affluent (Popkin, 2011). As a result, this global lifestyle change directly opposes the growing scientific consensus that plant-based diets (i.e., those diets which have the bulk of calories from plant sources while limiting or avoiding animal sources) are more sustainable (e.g., de Boer & Aiking, 2011; Pimentel & Pimentel, 2003), more healthy (e.g., American Dietetic Association, 2003; Sabaté, 2003), and alleviate animal suffering (e.g., Foer, 2010; Singer & Mason, 2006).

In spite of these benefits, large segments of consumers in western societies do not seem willing to eat a plant-based diet (Lea, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006a, 2006b) or reduce meat consumption (Latvala et al., 2012; Schösler, de Boer, & Boersema, 2012). Several scholars have been alerting that it may take a profound societal transition to achieve significant progresses on this regard (Dagevos & Voordouw, 2013; Schösler et al., 2012). However, evidence concerning the psychosocial processes which affect this shift remains sparse and insufficient relating to changes at the societal level (Cole & McCoskey, 2013; Stehfest et al., 2009). We believe that converging two recent lines of research will allow to provide new insights and improve theoretical integration of consumer motivations, thus better explaining consumer willingness and resistance to change. More specifically we refer to studies on willingness to eat plant-based diets and meat substitutes, and findings on the different contexts in which consumers expect meat as a food item. To provide an integrative framework from which to add to current knowledge, pertinent research and propositions on each of these topics are briefly summarized below.

Willingness to eat plant-based diets and meat substitutes

To our knowledge, only a pair of studies conducted in Australia has specifically addressed consumer willingness to eat plant-based diets (Lea et al., 2006a, 2006b). Although observing that some

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: joao_daniel_graca@iscte.pt, joao.graca@outlook.com (J. Graça).

consumers perceived several benefits in such diets, conclusions were that the large majority of the population was not ready to move away from meat. Significant perceived barriers included lack of dietary information, lack of desire to change habits, lack of options when eating out, and health concerns. However, the majority of participants in these studies actually disagreed that these were barriers to eating a plant-based diet, even though they were not following and not willing to follow one. Lea et al. called for more research to further understand their findings, and raised the possibility that there are other barriers to consumption that were not assessed in their studies.

Although not specifically targeted at plant-based diets, another set of studies exploring consumer acceptance of environmentally sustainable meat substitutes may provide insight into this issue (Elzerman, Hoek, van Boekel, & Luning, 2011; Hoek et al., 2011, 2013; Schösler et al., 2012). For instance, individuals who did not use meat substitutes or had a “light/medium” usage (i.e., less than once per month; once per month or more, but less than once per week) failed to accept the meat substitutes as viable alternatives to meat despite acknowledging ethical and weight control advantages which may accompany higher use of meat substitutes (Hoek et al., 2011). The key barriers found to hinder meat substitute acceptance were related to the product, namely unfamiliarity and low sensory appeal compared to meat. In order to make meat substitutes more attractive to meat consumers, product developers are thus called to significantly improve the sensory quality and resemblance to meat (Hoek et al., 2011; Tucker, 2014). Likewise, the most promising pathways to encourage large-scale shifts towards more plant-based diets are likely the ones that do not challenge existing meal formats and hierarchies, in which meat occupies a central role (Schösler et al., 2012).

Indeed, meat still occupies a central position in Western food culture and is depicted as the centre of meals (Barrena & Sánchez, 2009; Fiddes, 1991; Holm & Møhl, 2000; Twigg, 1984). There is also evidence of the belief that meat is necessary and seen as an irreplaceable source of vitality, coupled with the idea that plant-based meals are nutritionally deficient (Lea & Worsley, 2001). Gender plays an important role in this issue, with studies consistently showing higher levels in frequency and amount of meat consumption among men, and higher willingness to eat plant-based meals among women (e.g., Beardsworth & Keil, 1991; Prättälä et al., 2007; Rothgerber, 2013; Ruby, 2012; Santos & Booth, 1996). Furthermore, consumers identify that meat has unique sensory properties in terms of texture and taste (Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunsø, 2004; Kenyon & Barker, 1998). Additionally, meat substitutes tend to rank lower than meat overall, but in particular the substitutes fail with regard to sensory appreciation and other attributes such as value and luxury (Hoek et al., 2011).

Meat in context: different framings may help explain incongruences

Following a review on consumer perceptions of risk and safety issues surrounding meat, Korzen and Lassen (2010) commented on the conflict between attitudes and behaviours, and the assumption in the reviewed studies that people should be consistent in what they say and do. Likewise, several studies have been showing that although many consumers express health, environmental and animal welfare-related concerns about meat, their behaviour is often not in accordance with their concerns (Holm & Møhl, 2000; Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005; Verbeke, Pérez-Cueto, de Barcellos, Krystallis, & Grunert, 2010). Introducing context as a methodological and analytical tool may facilitate a better understanding of consumer perceptions and make sense of some of these apparent inconsistencies (Korzen & Lassen, 2010). For example, meat in the context of everyday food practices may emerge for consumers anchored in a particular frame of reference (e.g., taste preferences, price,

buying, or cooking), and exclude other framings associated with the impacts of current patterns of production and consumption (e.g., environment, health, or animal welfare). Harmonizing concerns people have and the choices people make as consumers may thus benefit from an improved understanding on how these different framings interact.

Although to our knowledge no studies have specifically addressed these interactions, recent evidence on what is called the “meat paradox” (i.e., people enjoying eating meat but disapproving of harming animals; see Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014) does provide some insights. Specifically, overlapping the framings of meat as food and meat as animal seems to evoke dissonance in the moral domain. For instance, categorization as food was found to reduce animals’ perceived capacity to suffer and restrict moral concern for animals (Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011). Likewise, it was observed that eating meat reduces moral concern for animals in general, the perceived moral status of animals used for meat, and the ascription of mental states necessary to experience suffering (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). In contrast, having people first reflect on their own perceptions of animals’ mental attributes subsequently increases feelings of disgust at the thought of eating animals (Ruby & Heine, 2012). Disgust is an emotional aversion and a critical factor in determining people’s willingness to ingest a given food (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). It also plays a key role in moral judgement (Pizarro, Inbar, & Helion, 2011; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). Denying animals certain psychological characteristics has indeed been identified as a mechanism of moral disengagement among meat eaters (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011).

Current study – research questions and objectives

Plant-based diets and alternatives to meat are increasingly associated with several benefits, but a high consumption of meat and a low regard for meat substitutes is still the dominant cultural pattern in most western societies. Most consumers do not seem willing to shift towards a more plant-based diet. Our general aim is to contribute to a further understanding of the psychosocial processes that hinder or facilitate this transition. We will draw on qualitative data and use multiple correspondence analysis to detect and represent underlying structures in the dataset, as a way to provide opportunities to identify key issues, raise data-driven propositions and derive hypotheses to be tested in further research. Specifically, we address three main research questions regarding the representations, impacts and rationales of diet with regard to meat consumption.

- 1) *How do representations of meat relate with willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet?*

Meat’s central role and special status are suggested to play a part in hindering a large-scale shift towards plant-based diets, but moving down to the level of the consumer, meat’s role and status are only reflective of its appraisal by individuals within a culture. Thus, moving beyond the abstract notion of meat as the dominant food (alongside with other animal-based products), it is the core of that appraisal that must be investigated (Fiddes, 1991). Our objective is to unpack what specific thoughts, ideas and feelings about meat are associated with personal willingness to follow a more plant-based diet. Here we contemplate representations of meat framed in the context of everyday food practices.

- 2) *How do perceived impacts of meat relate with willingness to adopt a more plant-based diet?*

We give sequence to the notion that putting meat in context may help in explaining consumer perceptions on its risks and impacts, and extend this proposition to the understanding of meat substitution. By addressing this question, our

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